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The Politics of Subreption: Resisting the Sublime in Shelley’s “Mont Blanc”

Beneath the obvious attachment to the sublime in Percy Bysshe Shelley’s 1816 “Mont Blanc,” there is a profound unease with—and, in the end, a critical resistance to—the political implications of the sublime experience described in the poem. The source of this unease and resistance is the violence inherent in sublimity: violence that, in both its dynamic of power and domination and its necessary concealment of its own means, provides a model for the institutionalization of repressive political authority. While “Mont Blanc” is traditionally read as engaging the alpine sublime in order to pose fundamental ontological and epistemological questions—thus construing the sublime moment as the origin of questions about “the nature of mind, the nature of knowledge, the nature of reality, and the relation of the human mind to the universe”—a closer examination of the poem’s politics, both implicit and explicit, reveals the sublime to be double-edged: creative of a precarious subjective “vacancy” that can incite philosophical and critical reflection but that can also, through its constitutive violence, foreclose upon those reflective capacities.

Shelley is certainly not alone in worrying the close and troubling relationship between the sublime and sociopolitical power. He would have


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found an exposition of the sublimity of tyrannical power in his father-in-law William Godwin's 1794 novel Caleb Williams, wherein Godwin discerns and dramatizes, through the relationship of Falkland and Williams, the politics of Edmund Burke's influential ideas on the sublime: in a word, Williams repeatedly loses self-possession when he must confront his unmistakably sublime master Falkland, and their relationship is a virtual set-piece, as we shall see, from Burke's Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful. More broadly speaking, the potentially deleterious political implications of the sublime are analyzed in the work of critics ranging from Anne K. Mellor, who critiques the "engendering of the sublime as a masculinized experience of power" and violence in Burke, Kant, Wordsworth, and Coleridge (as well as critics Samuel Holt Monk and Thomas Weiskel), to Terry Eagleton, who finds the sublime historically to be conservative and coercive at its core, "a suitably defused, aestheticized version of the values of the ancien régime" that "as a kind of terror, crushes us into submission." Nonetheless, this sense of the sublime as, at the very least, politically problematic has yet to inform the extensive and formidable body of criticism on "Mont Blanc" in a substantive way.

The following essay aims to address this gap in the criticism first by returning to the place of the poem's original publication, Percy and Mary Shelley's History of a Six Weeks' Tour, in order to reveal, amid a searching but enthusiastic embrace of the famed alpine sublime, both Shelley's keen sense of the violence involved in the experience as well as his inchoate concerns with the close relationship between sublimity and the imagining of authority. Next I turn to the theory of the sublime in Longinus, Burke, and Kant in order to examine the place of violence—and, crucially, what Kant terms "subjection"—in their otherwise differing analyses of sublimity, and thus to frame Shelley's own exploration of the political implications of the violence of the sublime. What emerges, then, in "Mont Blanc" is both a critique of the sublime and the habits of mind it by definition compels—which, in a word, is the unreflective acceptance of violence in all its forms as existing beyond human redress—and a realignment of aesthetic practice and experience with a specific countermeasure to this violence that we may call nonviolence.


In the published narrative of their 1814 and 1816 travels through the Continent, both Percy and Mary Shelley employ the term "sublime" to describe the alpine landscapes they encounter. At first glance, we note that the term is used in a casual manner, as if the intended readership of History of a Six Weeks' Tour would already know what the sublime is. For example, in a section written by Mary, we read the following: "the scenery grows perpetually more wonderful and sublime: pine forests of impenetrable thickness, and untrodden, nay, inaccessible expanse spread on every side." A few pages later, Mary writes, of the road from Les Rousses to Gex, near Lake Geneva, that "the prospect around, however, was sufficiently sublime to command our attention—never was a scene more awfully desolate" (93). In these two instances, Mary is drawing on eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century conventions of the natural sublime to convey here and Percy's experiences of the Alps and the pressure they exert on the imagination: "impenetrable" and "inaccessible" function both physically and imaginatively, such that not only is one's "attention" commanded, but one's "awe" is as well.

The "awe" elicited by the sublime, and precisely how the sublime "commands our attention," is the subject of Percy's contributions to History of a Six Weeks' Tour, which include "Mont Blanc" and two letters he originally wrote to Thomas Love Peacock and revised for the 1817 publication of the travelogue. These letters, however, explore more than just the dynamics of the natural sublime; they begin to engage its political implications, which is to say, the experience of power, the subject's affective-imaginative response to it, and, by extension, the potential, as we shall see, for the sublime to be co-opted and deployed for the purposes of oppression. The letters to Peacock in History of a Six Weeks' Tour begin to make this clear. In the first, Shelley writes of finally seeing Mont Blanc:

Mont Blanc was before us... I never knew—I never imagined what mountains were before. The immensity of these aerial summits excited, when they suddenly burst upon the sight, a sentiment of exaltatic wonder, not unalloyed to madness.... And remember this was all one scene, it all pressed home to our regard and our imagination. Though it embraced a vast extent of space, the snowy pyramids which shot into the bright blue sky seemed to overhang our path; the ravine, clothed with gigantic pines, and black with its depth below, so deep...
that the very roaring of the untameable Arve, which rolled through it, could not be heard above—all was as much our own, as if we had been the creators of such impressions in the minds of others as now occupied our own. (151–52)

For Shelley, the experience of the natural sublime was initially positive, for it meant a fundamental intellectual expansion: even though he had of course seen "mountains" before, he had never seen—or been able to imagine—a mountain so "immense." In other words, he had reached the threshold of his knowledge about the world. The experience of reaching the limen is one of "extatic wonder" and veritable "madness" stemming in large part from the violence integral to the moment, the mountain's "bursting upon the sight" and "pressing" on the imagination. Lastly, sublime experience is suggestedly reminiscent of aesthetic creation in the sense that it has the effect of making the subject feel as if the entire scene—the mountain, the ravine, the Arve—not only is somehow his own original imaginative creation, but also that the impression in his mind exists in the minds of others. There is, in other words, a loss of self-possession involved in the Shelleyan sublime; more precisely, the sublime loss of self is exchanged for the illusion of aesthetic gain, or the illusion that it is aesthetic gain. Indeed, Shelley leaves us without a doubt that the feeling of imaginative power is a momentary illusion, completing the description with the attribution of power to Nature: "Nature was the poet, whose harmony held our spirits more breathless than the divinest" (152). It is not our own poetry, our own "making," but rather Nature's.

A few pages later in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour*, Shelley gestures toward the potential political implications of this kind of sublime experience. He writes to Peacock of visiting the Mer de Glace:

Do you, who assert the supremacy of Ahriman, imagine him throned among these desolating snows, among these palaces of death and frost, so sculptured in this their terrible magnificence by the adamantine hand of necessity, and that he casts around him, as the first essays of his final usurpation, avalanches, torrents, rocks, and thunders, and above all these deadly glaciers, at once the proof and symbol of his reign;—add to this, the degradation of the human species. This is a part of the subject more mournful and less sublime; but such as neither the poet nor the philosopher should disdain to regard. (162–63)

Ahriman is the darker half, representing death and evil, of the deity in the ancient Persian religion Zoroastrianism, which Shelley and Peacock had been discussing since first meeting each other in 1812. However, the significance of Shelley invoking "Ahriman" in this context is to imply that it is a natural but erroneous step from, on the one hand, the experience of the natural sublime to, on the other, the imagining of a deity who is the creator of nature and the cause of the experience. One of the dangers of the sublime is precisely this causal logic: that "extasy" and "breathlessness" involved in the experience of the mountains, the ravine, the Arve, the pines, and the glaciers can lead us to posit an anthropomorphized force as the only possible source of our experience. It is but a short distance to the potential political implications of such a dynamic, wherein an imitation of the sublime—brings about enough "extasy" and "breathlessness" in the subjects, and thus their openness to the experience of overwhelming psychological force—could be enlisted in the service of those seeking the arrogation and legitimation of sociopolitical power. Power is seized by miming the experience of the sublime; it is then made legitimate when the subjects identify the deity as the source of power. Shelley's invocation of Ahriman in *History of a Six Weeks' Tour* reminds us that there is a dark side to the sublime.

In an important rehistoricization of Shelley's engagement with the sublime, Cian Duffy identifies this dark side as comprising the theological and religious currents of the eighteenth-century British discourse on the sublime. "From the origins of the discourse on the sublime in the seventeenth century," Duffy writes, "the defeat of the understanding by natural grandeur had repeatedly been figured by British philosophers and aestheticians as evidence of the immanent presence of God in creation." With his contemporaries Thomas Reid and Archibald Alison continuing this tradition, Shelley sought, Duffy argues, to intervene directly in the discourse of the sublime by "revising it along politically radical lines." In the case of "Mont Blanc," Shelley reacts against both the vulgar commercialization of alpine tourism and its root cause, which is none other than the "pious, Christian account of the natural sublime that informs Coleridge's 'Hymn [Before Sun-rise, In the Vale of Chamonix]'" (111), merely another instance of finding proof in nature of God's creative grandeur. According to Duffy, Shelley's "politically progressive" response to Coleridge's "reactionary illusion" (113) is to find evidence of the opposite: in other words, to construe the natural sublime of Mont Blanc as the scene of Nature's impenetrable materiality; to think its power and violence as beyond the reach of even

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God’s paternalistic creative hand and subject only to “its own internal (Necessary) laws” (120).

Yet Duffy’s insightful recasting of “Mont Blanc” suggests a politics that I believe the Shelley of 1816 (when he began composing the poem) would not endorse wholly, and in fact was moving away from. For Duffy, the violence of the scene at Chamouni stands for the violence of revolution and, specifically, the violence of the French Revolution, given the presence of Rousseau in Shelley’s mind when he toured the Alps. In other words, Duffy suggests that Shelley views the violence of the French Revolution and its aftermath as necessary and inevitable—i.e., “natural”—aspects of otherwise positive historical and political change. Revolutions and their violence exist, in the same manner as the sublime mountain and ravine exist, beyond the reach of human redress. Bloodshed in the name of the ideals of liberty, equality, and fraternity is thus regretted but condoned. Doubtless there are moments when Shelley voices this position, but, in this sense, Duffy’s reading recalls the Shelley of 1813’s Queen Mab rather than the Shelley of, for example, 1817’s Laon and Cythna, an attempt at the “beau ideal as it were of the French Revolution,” wherein Shelley asks of revolution if “perchance blood need not flow?” That Shelley in 1817 was writing about the possibility of nonviolent political change suggests that we would do well to orient “Mont Blanc” towards this point, rather than backwards towards a poem whose politics Shelley would eventually disown.

Sublimity is at the center of the politics of “Mont Blanc,” and I mean to argue that there is an overlooked thread in the poem that critically resists the sublime, even its politically progressive reformulations, because of its constitutive, self-legitimating violence. Rather than revise the discourse of the sublime along necessitarian or materialist lines, “Mont Blanc” exposes its complicity in the cycle of violence that characterized recent European political history, which would include not only the French Revolution, but also the reactionary measures against radicalism at home in Britain, as well as, of course, the Reign of Terror, Napoleon, and the Bourbon Restoration.

As we shall see in turning to the theory of the sublime, Shelley discerns the political dubiousness of the sublime in two aspects: first, in the conceal-

10. Upon hearing of pirated printings of Queen Mab in 1821, Shelley declared: “I regret this publication, not so much from literary vanity, as because I fear it is better fitted to injure than to serve the cause of freedom” (Letters 2:305).
teenth- and early eighteenth-century British aesthetics. The ancient Peri Hypnos, or On the Sublime, of “Longinus” was translated into French by Nicolas Boileau-Despreaux and published in 1674, inaugurating the modern edition literary and critical interest in the sublime. In the opening chapter of this influential tract, Longinus writes, “the Sublime rather ravishes than persuades.”13 Sublimity, Longinus continues, “bears out all before it like a hurricane, and presents, at one view, the Orator’s whole collected force” (4). Much stronger than the art of persuasion, the power of the sublime is an “irresistible force” (3).

In an interpretation of this passage from the Peri Hypnos, the Augustan dramatist and critic John Dennis highlights the violence implicit in the experience of the sublime:

For [Longinus] tells us at the beginning of his Treatise that the Sublime does not so properly persuade us, as it Ravishes and Transports us, and produces in us a certain admiration mingled with astonishment and with surprise, which is quite another thing than barely Pleasing or the barely persuading; that it gives a noble Vigour to a Discourse, an invincible force which commits a pleasing Rape upon the very Soul of the Reader; that whenever it breaks out where it ought to do, like the Artillery of Jove, it Thunders blazes and strikes at once, and shows all the united force of a Writer.14

Dennis captures the paradoxical and concealing nature of sublime violence in his metaphorical description of the experience as a “pleasing Rape”: it is foremost and undeniable a “rape,” a profound violation of one’s person; but it also gives pleasure. Indeed, one can see how the pleasure of the experience effectively hides the original violence, the violence of “rape,” “ravishment,” and forced “transport.” The violence of the sublime is both unavoidable—“an invincible force”—and metaphysical, so to speak, as it is a violation of the “Soul of the Reader” rather than his body. The incorporeal nature of this violence enables its pleasurable concealment.

As we can begin to see, sublime violence is formally close to the structure of violence identified by Derrida: an original transcendental violence, which is then concealed, and which further takes the form of empirically discernible violence. Dennis’s figure for this third violence, the “Artillery of Jove,” is echoed by Shelley in the letter to Peacock in History of a Six


of sublime and violent experience of power for Burke is the conceiving of the idea of the Deity, through which the subject experiences the ultimate violence: "But whilst we contemplate so vast an object, under the arm, as it were, of almighty power, and invested upon every side with omnipresence, we shrink into the minuteness of our own nature, and are, in a manner, annihilated before him" (111).

The inherent but pleasurable violence of the sublime is an element of Kant’s exploration of the sublime in his Critique of the Power of Judgment. Kant’s “Third Critique” provides an analysis of the violence of the sublime that illuminates the skepticism about the sublime Shelley develops in “Mont Blanc.” Although there has been resistance by some critics to the application of Kant’s philosophy in understanding Shelley’s poetry, the two thinkers overlap in a number of compelling ways. While Shelley’s poetry gropingly reveals both the violence and the violent consequences of the sublime—as the author himself seems to be coming to terms with that violence through the poetry—Kant’s “Third Critique” provides a conceptual framework for Shelley’s realizations, as well as an illuminating and sympathetic vision for the essential violence of the sublime.

For Kant, judgments of the sublime and of the beautiful are aesthetic judgments, which means that they have pleasure or displeasure connected with them. Aesthetic judgments fall in the category of “reflecting” judgments rather than “determining” judgments: in “determining” judgments, a “particular” is subsumed under the “universal (the rule, the principle, the law),” which is to say that experience of a given “particular” is understood in terms of a rule, principle, or law that already exists; in “reflecting” judgments, “only the particular is given, for which the universal is to be found.” Where judgments of beauty are judgments of taste, of the pleasing form of an object, judgments of the sublime are judgments that “[arise] from a feeling of spirit” (78) that comes from an encounter with virtual formlessness. Indeed, the question of form versus formlessness is Kant’s initial way of distinguishing between the beautiful and the sublime in the “Analytic of the Sublime”: “The beautiful in nature concerns the form of an object, which consists in limitation; the sublime, by contrast, is to be found in a formless object insofar as limitationlessness is represented in it, or at its instance, and yet it is also thought as a totality” (128). Kant continues with the observation that beauty “brings with it a feeling of the promotion of life” and, what is more, imaginative “play,” whereas sublimity has a substantially different effect: “negative pleasure” from the “feeling of a momentary inhibition of the vital powers and the immediately following and all the more powerful outpouring of them” (128–29).

The “inhibition of our vital powers,” which stems from the sense of inadequacy when faced with the sublime paradox of conceiving “limitlessness” and “totality” at the same time, can be illustrated by reference to Shelley’s description of Mont Blanc in History of a Six-Weeks’ Tour: in Shelley’s reminder to Peacock that although the experience as recorded “embraced a vast expanse of space,” or was apparently limitless, it was important to “remember that this was all one scene,” thus representing a totality. The dialectic of cognitive “inhibition” and subsequent “outpouring” is present in Shelley’s text as well, as he is first lost in “ecstasy” and “madness” only to feel eventually that he was himself the creator, or “poet,” responsible for the “impressions” in the mind. What is more, Shelley highlights the fear integral to the experience of the alpine sublime:

...on the first day the [mule] which I rode fell in what the guides call a mauvais pas so that I narrowly escaped being precipitated down the mountain. We passed over a hollow covered with snow, down which vast stones are accustomed to roll. One had fallen the preceding day, a little time after we had returned: our guides desired us to pass quickly, for it is said that sometimes the least sound will accelerate their descent. (164–65)

The effect is violent, the opposite of “the promotion of life”: in Burke’s terminology, it is terror, the fear of pain or death that is the source of all sublimity. While this experience is closer to sheer terror than the imagining of terror from safety that constitutes the sublime, Shelley nonetheless includes it in his description of the alpine road to intensify the fearful nature of even the approach to the sublime mountain. The entire experience is permeated with terror.

Along with the question of limitation and limitlessness, Kant claims that the “most important and intrinsic difference between the sublime and the beautiful” is the matter of violence. Kant writes that the sublime “[appears] in its form to be contrapurpose for our power of judgment, unsuitable for our faculty of presentation, and as it were doing violence to our imagination, but is nevertheless judged all the more sublime for that” (129, my emphasis). The violence of the sublime is pleasing, inducing a “negative pleasure,” which leads Kant to ask how this could be so, how “we can designate with an expression of approval that which is apprehended in itself as contrapurpose” or violent (129)? Kant concludes that a sublime object

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16. On the role of power “defined as the ability to hurt” in Burke’s sublime, see Frances Ferguson, Solitude and the Sublime: Romanticism and the Aesthetics of Individualism (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 49–50.
17. See Duffy, Shelley and the Revolutionary Sublime, 1–12.
exists only “in the mind” rather than in the phenomenal world, where objects of beauty reside: “for what is sublime cannot be contained in any sensible form, but concerns only ideas of reason, which, though no presentation adequate to them is possible, are provoked and called to mind precisely by this inadequacy, which does allow of sensible presentation” (129). The contraposition in the sublime in the clash between “ideas of reason” and that which “cannot be contained in any sensible form,” as the sublime calls forth both at the same time. Shelley’s letter to Peacock confirms that he was at least aware of the potential existence of the sublime “in the mind” rather than in the sensuous world, as it occurred to him in seeing Mont Blanc that “all was as much our own.” According to the Kantian paradigm, such an intimation is predicated on the violence of the sublime, on its experiential unsuitability for our powers of representation. In other words, although the understanding is overwhelmed initially in the sublime, reason nonetheless distinguishes itself as the “supersensible faculty” in us. The original violence of the sublime is thus followed by a restorative violence: reason’s assertion of its dominion over nature.19

Kant divides the sublime into the “mathematically sublime” and the “dynamically sublime.” Both involve violence to the imagination, and thus are relevant for our purposes here, as Kant’s descriptions of the two categories illuminate the emergence of reason, through the sublime, as a reactionary violence, as a potentially instrument and domineering force. The “mathematically sublime” concerns magnitude, and the imagination’s “striving to advance to the infinite” (134). In the mathematically sublime—which can be brought on by architectural structures such as the pyramids in Egypt or St. Peter’s in Rome, but most purely by “raw nature” like Mont Blanc—we become aware initially of the “inadequacy” of our imagination in comprehending the magnitude of certain things in the sensible world” (134).

19. With an ecocritical and ecocentric interest, Christopher Hitt attempts provocatively to theorize a sublime that would include the possibility of arrestment before the incursion of reason, before, in other words, the human impulse to dominate nature takes over; see Hitt, “Towards an Ecological Sublime,” New Literary History 30. no. 3 (Summer 1999): 607–23. According to Hitt, the results of a sublime experience that does not proceed at the way to reason’s violent self-assertion would include “awe, envelopment, and transcendence” in the face of the “wild othemer of nature,” and, in the end, “humility,” given our new understanding of the unsuitability of logic to nature’s power (620). Yet less feasible in Hitt’s searching and suggestive account is the possibility of sustaining the destabilizing, antilogocentric humility than can occur with the sublime; that is, the essential logic of the sublime is such that, if an experience is properly sublime, it involves reason’s eventual self-assertion because reason is precisely the faculty that was initially provoked, and one wonders if an experience without the provocation of and response by reason belongs fully under the sign of the sublime.

that excite the idea of infinity. The idea of infinity brought on by certain objects contravenes the capacities of our sense; however, the fact that we possess the concept of infinity in the first place is due to reason, which has now asserted its power.

The “dynamically sublime” concerns power, which Kant defines as “a capacity that is superior to great obstacles,” as well as dominion, which is power that is “superior to the resistance of something that itself possesses power” (143). Similar in a way to the Burkean sublime, Kant’s dynamical sublime is based on fear; however, in this case fear is coupled with the realization that any “resistance” on the part of the subject “would be completely futile” (144). Again as with Burke’s sublime, the subject fears the object abstractedly and from a position of actual safety:

Bold, overhanging, as it were threatening cliffs, thunder clouds towering up into the heavens, bringing with them flashes of lightning and crashes of thunder, volcanoes with their all-destroying violence, hurricanes with the devastation they leave behind, the boundless ocean set into a rage, a lofty waterfall on a mighty river, etc., make our capacity to resist into an insignificant trifle in comparison with their power. But the sight of them only becomes all the more attractive the more fearful it is, as long as we find ourselves in safety. (144)

In Kant’s terms, these are experiences of dominion, which is to say, they are experiences of violence. Despite, or indeed because of the violence of the sublime, of actually surviving the imaginary threat of annihilation, of being made to feel like an “insignificant trifle,” the subject comes to feel its own power. Kant continues, over nature. In other words, we come to experience, in our imagined dominion over nature, our own capacity for violence. What is more, it is pleasurable—hence, sublime—for us to experience our own proclivity for violence, even if that pleasure originates as the “negative pleasure” of violence done to our imagination. Indeed, what we come to recognize, through the violence of the sublime, is our own sublimity writ large. We display, in turn, the potential to practice violence against the imaginations of others.

Violence is made palatable, in the extreme pleasurable, and we could say, literally, reasonable, through the experience of the sublime because the original violence—the feeling of dominion over our imagination, over our senses, and over our capacity to resist—gets concealed, essentially forgotten, in the process. In other words, the subject is made unaware of the
original moment of violence: he is "raped," but he is pleased by it, identifying with his attacker, thus losing sight of the violence of the act. Indeed, concealment itself is one of the violations of the sublime. As Derrida theorizes, concealment or effacement is a secondary violence, which means that, as the violence of "the law"—as "reparatory, protective, instituting the 'moral,' prescribing the concealment of writing"—it follows inevitably from the original violence of discourse. In Kant's articulation, the imagination's inability to live up to the demands (laws) of reason is what requires the self-denigration, and consequently self-concealment, constitutive of sublime experience: we "substitute" "respect" for nature for self-respect. We enact the substitution in order to enable the eventual intercession of reason, to experience our power, the dominion of reason, and thus its violence. For Kant, this substitution is the violence of "subreption," tantamount to a suppression or concealment of the truth in the interest of a dispensation:

... the feeling of the sublime in nature is respect for our own vocation, which we show to an object in nature through a certain subreption (substitution of a respect for the object instead of for the idea of humanity in our subject), which as it were makes inuitable the superiority of the rational vocation of our cognitive faculty over the greatest faculty of sensibility. (141)

Through the fallacy of subreption, the sublime covers up the agency of subject, as what happens "in the mind" or is the product of the imagination is misconceived as occurring in or as a property of an object in the external sensuous world. In this sense, as commentators have pointed out, the "subreption" of Kant's sublime is a form of reification: in the Marxist definition, the mistake of engaging the purely idealistic as if it had concrete existence. With the sublime, the dispensation sought through subreption is the pleasure associated with feeling our own capacity for violence, which is to say the pleasure of experiencing our own sublimity, our own power over nature and, it follows, our potential domination over others. It is fair to say, then, that the sublime is the reification of violence: it is


the moment when we accept violence as the status quo, as simply "things as they are"; when we perceive violence as an objective reality of the world rather than as a human product; when we encounter it as a necessity rather than a contingency. This moment is itself violent. The sublime marks the violent opening of discourse: it marks the inception of a violence deployed through the tacitly coerced assent of the subject. In other words, as Thomas Huhn writes, the Kantian sublime "describes the founding moment of both subjectivity and community, and... does this via a legitimation of domination and violence." The sublime names the moment when transcendental violence is done to the subject; and, consequently, an intersubjective-discursive community of further violence is enabled, as the subject becomes conditioned both to repeat the experience and to seek the pleasure of its own sublimity.

"Mont Blanc" makes one of Shelley's strongest and most direct claims for the sociopolitical potential of the aesthetic response to nature. In the third section of the poem, after describing both the mountain and the ravine beneath it, Shelley writes, "Thou hast a voice, great mountain, to repeal / Large codes of fraud and woe" (80–81). The "large codes" are already in place, but the poem is chiding that there is something in the experience of the Vale of Chamouni that might provide the foundation of resistance to their continuation. Tied to the possibility of repealing "codes of fraud and woe" is the idea of humankind's potential reconciliation with nature, for, as "Mont Blanc" puts it:

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be
But for such faith with nature reconciled;

23. Shelley's well-known Greek signature in the hotel register at Chamounix—"Democra, Philanthropist, and Athein"—reveals the scale of the politics he had in mind in thinking through his experience at Mont Blanc: his political hope for the poem resides in resistance to the ideological triumvirate of "god and king and law," as he would call them in "The Mask of Anarchy." That is, the "large codes" referred to in "Mont Blanc" are not specific laws in place in England in 1816; rather, the "large codes" are the pervasive ideologies plaguing Europe in 1816—monarchy and conventional religious belief—that enable repressive legislation in the first place. On the signature in the hotel register, see Richard Holmes, Shelley: The Pursuit (London: Quartet Books, 1976), 342; and James Bieri, Percy Bysshe Shelley: A Biography (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 342.
An imagined future reconciliation presupposes a present situation of discord or disunity, as the concept of reconciliation implies a return to peace and the mitigation of violence. In this sense, “Mont Blanc” takes discursive violence as its subject: the inevitable violence that occurred at some moment in the past and thus already obtains in the relationship between man and nature. The poem filters this violence through the sublime: it is an “awful scene” before the speaker, as he attempts to imagine the unimaginable, to figure the nonfigurable “everlasting universe of things” (1), leaving him in a “trance sublime and strange” (35). Indeed, “Mont Blanc” suggests that mankind’s profound disharmony with nature is the mark of the violence of the sublime; and that its desire for reconciliation is an attempt at lessening the violence of the world, which is to say, an instantiation of nonviolence that acknowledges the originary violence of discourse, the moment when man and nature were first “riven.” The mitigation of violence is imagined to occur by way of critical-aesthetic means: initially through the aesthetic response to the “sublime” setting of Mont Blanc, which, via the interrogation dramatized by the poem, eventually gives way to a model of critical agency-agency aware of its own role in the violence of the world—as the hope for reconciliation. It is only when the response to the mountain and ravine is “so mild, / So solemn, so serene,” with mildness and serenity explicitly undercutting the sublime of violence, that mankind might reconcile itself with nature.

Violent imagery abounds in “Mont Blanc.” The poem’s central claim about the sociopolitical potential of the aesthetic response to the mountain setting, the intimation of man’s possible reconciliation with nature, follows a description of the “rude, bare, high, / Ghastly, and scarred, and riven” (70–71) mountain range. What is more, the “riven-ness” of the mountain is imagined to be the result of some deity’s anger: “Is this the scene / Where the old Earthquake-daemon taught her young / Ruin? Were these their toys?” (71–73). This is the dark side of the sublime: that it leads to the creation of false deities, the first step in the unrehearsed practice of conventional religious belief, which Shelley often refers to as superstition. The questions continue as the poem asks, “or did a sea / Of fire envelop once this silent snow?” (73–74). Gazing at the “unearthly forms” of Mont Blanc’s “subject mountains,” the questioner in “Mont Blanc” reaches a stark conclusion: “None can reply—all seems eternal now” (75).

Of the mountain’s silence at this moment, Paul Endo has suggested that it functions as a crucial “crossroads” or “threshold moment” in the subjective experience of Mont Blanc: in prolonging it, in effectively lingering over the silence of the mountain, Shelley dramatizes his refusal to convert that silence into conventional religious belief, as many before him, including Coleridge, had done. Moreover, the experience of silence, Endo argues, represents a negative sublime of “reason’s recognition of the imagination’s limits,” and the negative, rather than be “negated into a positive,” as in Hegel, should be “respected as that beyond the self.” In other words, despite reason’s intervention at this point to subdue the imagination’s momentary feeling of power over the natural world (i.e., the implicit totalizing interpretation of nature in Shelley’s questions about the “Earthquake-daemon,” etc.), the mountain, through its “silence,” is instead felt to have chastened the subject, who maintains his “respect” for “that beyond the self.” Without saying so, Endo’s Kantian reading exposes the basic dynamic of subjection and its foundational function in the sublime, as Shelley’s subject ascribes to the mountain what is actually going on in his own mind: as Kant writes, he substitutes respect for nature for self-respect.

But with a depth that is yet to be recognized, the structure of subjection informs “Mont Blanc” from its opening stanza forward. Traditionally read as an attempt to conceptualize the relationship of mind to world and thoughts to things that, in Earl Wasserman’s phrase, turns inevitably into an “ontological circle” of imagery and syntax, the opening stanza actually establishes a power relationship that hints at Shelley’s grasp of the troubling political implications of the sublime experience at Mont Blanc. In short, there is an unacknowledged politics to the poem’s famous opening that is missed by most readings:

The everlasting universe of things
Flows through the mind, and rolls its rapid waves,
Now dark—now glittering—now reflecting gloom—
Now lending splendour, where from secret springs
The source of human thought its tribute brings
Of waters—with a sound but half its own,
Such as a feeble brook will oft assume
In the wild woods, among the mountains lone,
Where waterfalls and winds contend, and a vast river
Over its rocks ceaselessly bursts and raves.

(1–11)

In their figurative and rhetorical compression, these lines initially posit a relationship between two entities: the “everlasting universe of things” on the
one hand and, on the other, the “mind” through which the “universe” flows. As Frances Ferguson writes, Shelley establishes “an elaborate schema of reciprocity” that stands for not only the relationship between knowledge and the individual mind but also that of “all human language . . . to an individual speaker.” 26 But there are political implications to this reciprocity that we would do well not to miss, for, indeed, the relationship between the phenomenal world of “things” and the noumenal realm of the “human mind,” or between language and its speaker, is the poem’s enabling dialectic as well as the source of the violence it seeks to mitigate. The violence of the relationship resides in the necessary dependence of one world on the other, which makes their relationship one of power.

That the relationship between the “universe” and the “mind” is defined by power comes through in the introduction of the “secret springs” of “human thought.” The relative adverb “where” refers to the entire situation preceding it in the poem, though its positional and spatial connotations obfuscate the utterly abstract nature of the poem’s opening description: there is no physical place from where “human thought” emanates; the poem’s speaker does not literally see the “secret springs” of cognition. The “universe” “flowing” and appearing variously to the perceiving mind is where “human thought” originates; in other words, the interaction between mind and world is the “source” of human cognition. However, the relationship, while reciprocal, is inherently one of power, of force relations, which comes across through the extended metaphor of the river, the “rapid waves” and the “flowing” of the “everlasting universe of things.” The “source of human thought” is described as existing in a relationship of “tribute” to the river of the phenomenal “universe.” On the one hand, this means that “human thought” is a less powerful river, a “tributary” of the “everlasting universe of things.” But on the other hand, the etymology and primary meaning of “tribute” point to a relationship of power and politics, as a “tribute” is an impost levied by one state or principality on another, less powerful state, who pays it “in acknowledgment of submission.” In other words, the opening metaphor of “Mont Blanc” suggests that the relationship between the perceiving mind and the phenomenal world may be defined by power and submission. Hence the perceiving mind is likened to a “feeble brook” in the conclusion of the poem’s first stanza: a “feeble brook” whose “sound” is “but half its own” due to its dependence on the “vast river” that “ceaselessly bursts and raves.” Indeed, the vast river, while levying an impost on its tributary, nonetheless depends on this supposedly “feeble brook.” Indeed, the Kantian notion of subjection—or the Marxian notion of reification—informs the sublimity of the scene: the discursive violence underwriting the relationship between the vast river and the


feeble brook is manifested, secondarily, in its ability to hide its real origin, making what is dependent on, here, human thought, seem to be dependent on it.

After its opening metaphor of the subreptive relationship between mind and world, the poem turns not to the mountain but to the negative space of the “Ravine of Arve,” the “dark, deep Ravine—/ Thou many-coloured, many-voiced vale” (13–13). The ravine is sublime to Shelley’s speaker. He sees “fast cloud-shadows and sunbeams” above the “pines, and crags, and caverns” of the ravine, and then declares it to be an “awful scene,” invoking “Power” and violence:

. . . awful scene,
Where Power in likeness of the Arve comes down
From the ice guls that gird his secret throne,
Bursting through these dark mountains like the flame
Of lightning through the tempest . . .

(15–19)

The employment of “likeness” in this description foregrounds the act of interpretation being undertaken by the poem’s speaker: the Arve River is before him with its “cloud-shadows” and “sunbeams,” but his imagination is what led him to posit the river as evidence of a “Power” responsible for the alpine landscape. That this “Power” is potentially pernicious is conveyed by the “secret throne” on which it resides, as “throne” suggests that “Power” has the same effect on its subject as a monarch would. What is more, the use of “secret” reinforces the sense of how “Power” remains “unseen,” or how it by definition conceals itself. It is only through violence, by “bursting through these dark mountains,” that “Power” is known in the phenomenal world, which is to say, only through violence can “Power” be imagined by its subject.

Reflecting on the “many-voiced vale” brings the speaker to return to the subreptive relationship of the two worlds posited at the outset of the poem, the “everlasting universe of things” on the one hand and the world of the perceiving human mind on the other. Experiencing the “caverns echoing to the Arve’s commotion” (30) is “sublime” for the speaker:

Dizzy Ravine!—and when I gaze on thee
I seem as in a trance sublime and strange
To muse on my own separate fantasy,
My own, my human mind, which passively
Now renders and receives fast influencings,
Holding an unremitting interchange
With the clear universe of things around;

(34–40)
This moment is the primary instance of the sublime in the poem, as the negative space of the ravine, along with the sense of "Power," it inspires, brings about the speaker’s "dizziness." The speaker’s "dizziness" is coupled with his being in a "trance sublime and strange," where "sublime" is the line of demarcation between two worlds: the world of the "trance," which is the poet’s "own separate fancy" in his "own ... human mind," on the one hand, and the "clear universe of things around" on the other. In other words, the "sublime" stands at the point of separation between man and Nature. It marks the originary violence of discourse, the moment when man and Nature were first riven into two realms, two "separate fantasies," that, according to the poem, might one day be reconciled. Although the "human mind" is described as "passive" in its relationship with the "clear universe of things around," it nonetheless "renders and receives," as well as "holding an unremitting interchange": verbs that suggest much more than passivity. In other words, the perceiving mind seems to have been driven into a delusion of passivity whereby it remains unaware of the potential power of its unavoidable "rendering" and "receiving."

As the effect of the originary violence of discourse, the ontological distance between subject and object—between the perceiving mind and some "remoter world"—becomes a focus of "Mont Blanc" with the start of the third section. Indeed, this is the subreptive discord whose reconciliation is essential to the poem’s politics, for it compels unreflective habits of mind. The idea of potentially reaching a "remoter" world and thus seeing behind "the veil of life and death" informs the appearance of the mountain itself to the speaker:

I look on high:—
Has some unknown omnipotence unfurled
The veil of life and death? or do I lie
In dream, and does the mightier world of sleep
Spread far around and inaccessible?
Its circles? For the very spirit fails,
Driven like a homeless cloud from steep to steep
That vanishes among the viewless gales!
Far, far above, piercing the infinite sky,
Mont Blanc appears,—still, snowy, and serene;

The speaker considers the possibility that he has in fact been granted access to the "remoter" world behind the "veil," an image frequently employed by Shelley to mark the line between the phenomenal and the nomenal worlds. Were the "veil of life and death" indeed to have been "unfurled," Shelley’s speaker would have effectively transcended the human. However, as the successive interrogatives of Shelley’s speaker suggest, the feeling of transcendence could just as well be a vision of "the mightier world of sleep." Indeed, the very question itself, rather than what the speaker might experience by "looking on high," now seems to bring about feelings characteristic of the sublime, as the speaker’s "very spirit fails" as a consequence of not knowing whether or not he sees behind "the veil of life and death." In other words, the sublime—the feeling that our "spirits fail" in the face of mountains and ravines and that we are "driven" by a higher "Power"—depends upon, and in fact resides in, the imaginative construction of a "veil" that serves primarily to divide man from Nature and to hide the real seat of "Power": the mind itself.

The "appearance" of Mont Blanc to the speaker is described as "piercing the infinite sky"; the verb "pierce," though figurative, nonetheless connotes violence. That the mountain’s mere phenomenal existence in the "universe of things" is sufficient to constitute violence is outlined in the subsequent detailing of the scene before the speaker, for while "stillness" and "serenity" are associated with the mountain, there is also most noticeably the evidence of violence:

Its subject mountains their unearthly forms
Pile round it, ice and rock; broad vales between
Of frozen floods, unfathomable deeps,
Blue as the overhanging heaven, that spread
And wind among the accumulated steepes:—
A desert peopled by the storms alone,
Save when the eagle brings some hunter’s bone,
And the wolf tracks her there—how hideously
Its shapes are heaped around! rude, bare, and high,
Ghastly, and scarred, and riven.

To the speaker, whose plane of vision has just been "pierced" by Mont Blanc, the smaller "subject mountains" and "broad vales" appear to be the results of a primordial violence of a deity, "some ... omnipotence," for, as we have seen, Shelley’s speaker invokes the "Earthquake-daemon" as potentially responsible. The "ice and rock" appear “heaped” and "piled" around, and the "forms" and "shapes" have "accumulated" presumably over years of violence. That the mountains are "unearthly" and the ravines’ depths "unfathomable" continues the identification of this experience as sublime, as the natural objects are unfigurable to the speaker. Violence even characterizes the single example given of the alpine scene appearing
“peopled” rather than deserted, as the poem invokes both the initial violence of the hunter who had left behind the bone gathered by the eagle and the further violence of the wolf hunting down the eagle. Consequently, the phenomenal world appears “scarred,” bearing the mark of having been “riven” from mankind through the sublime violence of discourse, the violence of having our purviews “pierced” by objects that are thus unfigurable.

Yet there is, it seems, the potential for “reconciliation,” and Shelley makes the claim for this potential amidst this “ghastly, scarred, and riven” alpine scenery. The poem posits “reconciliation” in the context of this sublime violence, for:

The wilderness has a mysterious tongue
Which teaches awful doubt, or faith so mild,
So solemn, so serene, that man may be
But for such faith with nature reconciled;
Thou hast a voice, great Mountain, to repeal
Large codes of fraud and woe; not understood
By all, but which the wise, and great, and good
Interpret, or make felt, or deeply feel.

(76-83)

These lines identify both the “wilderness,” which denotes a state prior to human cultivation, and the “great Mountain,” which had just “pierced” the speaker’s imagination, as agencies in the “reconciliation” of man and nature. Specifically, the poem notes both the “tongue” of the “wilderness” and the “voice” of the mountain; it is, in other words, the language of the phenomenal world, as “interpreted” or “felt” by the “wise” and the “good,” that constitutes its role in mitigating the violence of discursive experience. By invoking language and thus discursive communication and intersubjectivity, the poem here registers the agency of the perceiving mind in the process of reconciliation. Previously, the speaker had understood his role as “passively . . . rendering and receiving” stimuli from nature; now, however, the human mind is associated with a constellation of activities: “understanding,” “interpreting,” “making felt,” and “deeply feeling.” Such activity is dramatized in the transformation recorded by the poem’s very language, as the unfigurable and inscrutable “mysterious tongue” of the wilderness becomes a few lines later the apparently interpretable “voice” of the “great Mountain” that can enable “reconciliation.” In other words, the human mind that experiences the affecting mystery of alpine wilderness can “interpret” nature’s effect on him rather than seek only to transcend or even dominate nature—to “domesticate nature for the purposes of aestheticics,” as Ferguson puts it.27 Yet I would suggest that the perceiving mind is in fact becoming aware of its own reconciliatory agency, which is to say that the poem reveals a reflective awareness of the sublime’s ability to lead us into domination—and then swerves away from it.

Indeed, what is at stake in Shelley’s engagement with the sublime is the proper intellectual and political response to the sublime, for it has become clear that, in the experience of the sublime and its violence, the human mind might imagine a power, a known deity like Ahriman or even “some unknown omnipotence” who is responsible for the “ghastly, scarred, and riven” state of the world; or it can respond with “faith so mild, / So solemn, so serene, that man may be / But for such faith with nature reconciled.” While Shelley’s diction is responsible for some understandable confusion as to the meaning of “but for” in these lines, a look at an earlier version of the poem, a fair-copy in Shelley’s hand, makes a strong case that “but for” should be read as “only through.” In the earlier version of the poem, Shelley uses the preposition “in” to convey the centrality of “faith” to the possibility of reconciling man and nature: “faith so mild / So simple, so serene, that man may be / In such faith with Nature reconciled (78-80; my emphasis).28

Shelley does not specify what this “faith” is in—as in “faith in God,” for instance—as we might expect of an inveterate skeptic. Instead, he calls attention to the attributes of this “faith,” naming three of them: he describes the “faith” as “so mild, so solemn, so serene.” While “mild” appears here for the first time in the poem, both “solemn” and “serene” are employed at other critical moments. Our attention is called to the concepts themselves, and thus to the form of this “faith” rather than its content; in other words, praxis defined by solemnity, mildness, and serenity, rather than by its object, is imagined by the poem. In the earlier description of the Ravine of Arve, the speaker had noted the “old and solemn harmony” (24) that is caused by the wind through the pines; and in the poem’s closing stanza, a “still and solemn power” is associated with Mont Blanc. In addition, the “serenity” of the “faith” echoes the speaker’s initial description of the mountain’s appearance to him, as Mont Blanc, although it violently “pierces the infinite sky,” nonetheless seems “still, snowy, and serene.” “Serenity” is also used to describe the “power” lurking behind the entire scene, the power that informs the sublimity of the experience, as the speaker reflects: “Power dwells apart in its tranquility / Remote, serene,

inaccessible” (96–97). “Solemn” implies the seriousness of the “faith” described and its ethical importance, while “serene” and “mild,” in the context of the violent sublime, suggest that this “faith” is in fact a form of nonviolence. To act with mildness and serenity towards the unavoidable otherness of nature is a sublime act of “faith,” a literal gesture of confidence towards the discursive other that mitigates the inevitable violence of the moment. Through nonviolence, “power,” which is effectively violence, can be thought of or viewed as, in other words, interpreted as, “serene,” or peaceful, which is to say less violent. The formal means of nonviolence results in a less violent end, as the mountain remains “serene” in the poem even though it “pierces” the imagination of the speaker. Indeed, the trajectory of “Mont Blanc” is away from viewing the alpine landscape as sublime and violent and toward viewing it as solemn, serene, and mild: viewing or “interpreting” Power, for instance, in terms of beauty as well as of sublimity.

Shelley’s choice of “serene” to describe the “faith” as well as the mountain is significant, in that he had written “sublime” in the fair-copy and then replaced it with “serene” in the published travelogue. The poem once read as follows: “Power dwells apart in deep tranquility, / Remote, sublime, and inaccessible” (97–98, my emphasis). The version that appears in History of a Six-Weeks’ Tour replaces “deep” with “its” and “sublime” with “serene”: “Power dwells apart in its tranquility / Remote, serene, and inaccessible” (97–98, my emphasis). In other words, the “power” figured by the poem is either “sublime” or “serene,” and the revision reflects Shelley’s resistance to the sublime and desire to move away from its aesthetic. This resistance consists of and depends upon the critical agency of the perceiving mind, which the poem labels “the advertizing mind” in the lines immediately following the description of “power” as “serene”: “And this, the naked countenance of earth, / On which I gaze, even these primeval mountains / Teach the advertizing mind” (98–100). The “advertizing mind” is the mind more deeply aware of its own unavoidable “interpreting, making felt, and deeply feeling”; the mind that becomes reflexively cognizant of its own activity and thus is own power; the mind that realizes that it does not simply “passively render and receive.” The speaker’s “gaze” recalls his prior “gaze,” which had left him “as in a trance sublime and strange” (35). Now, however, his “gaze” is informed by the “serenity” rather than the “sublimity” of “power.” Only the critical, “advertizing” mind can respond to the violence of the sublime with lesser violence, which the poem conveys via the speaker’s ability to “interpret” the mountain as “serene.”

